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THE MESSAGES OF THE PSALMS

PSALM 126

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| 1. <i>When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion,
We were like unto them that dream.</i> | <i>When Jehovah turned the fortunes of Zion,
we became like them that dream.</i> |
| 2. <i>Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
And our tongue with singing:
Then said they among the nations,
The Lord hath done great things for them.</i> | <i>Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
and our tongue with ringing cries;
then said they among the nations,
Jehovah hath dealt nobly with them.</i> |
| 3. <i>The Lord hath done great things for us;
Whereof we are glad.</i> | <i>Jehovah dealt nobly indeed with us:
we became right glad.</i> |
| 4. <i>Turn again our captivity, O Lord,
As the streams in the South.</i> | <i>Turn our fortunes, O Jehovah,
as the streams in the south land.</i> |
| 5. <i>They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.</i> | <i>They that sowed with tears
shall reap with ringing cries.</i> |
| 6. <i>Though he goeth on his way weeping,
bearing forth the seed;
He shall come again with joy, bringing his sheaves with him.</i> | <i>Weeping may a man go on his way
bearing seed for scattering;
with ringing cries shall he come home
bearing his sheaves.</i> |

—Revised Version.

—Canon Cheyne's translation.

What shall we say of such a lyrical gem as this? Within the compass of six short verses, the highest heights are scaled and the deepest depths are sounded. We pass from laughter to tears, and from tears again to laughter. The sob of the exiles echoes across a score of years; then Jehovah had done great things for them, and they were glad. Within their old ancestral city they send up ringing shouts—shouts which turn to something like despair, as they see how unlovely that city is despite all her ancient and holy memories. We see the tear-stained face of the man who bears his seed, and knows not how long and how wearily he may have to wait for the

harvest. We hear, too, the ringing shouts of harvest home, as the laborers come back from the master's field with their arms full of sheaves. Tears and laughter, sorrow and joy, dejection and exaltation, exile and redemption, dreams both stern and lovely, spring and autumn, Israel and the heathen—all pass in rapid and moving succession across the verses of this marvelous lyric. All life is here; the changing moods which are but too familiar to every human heart are reflected here with the fidelity of a soul which had known it all only too sorrowfully well.

On the whole, the situation, with its strongly checkered contrasts, can best be met by the conditions of Haggai's time. Then the same eyes were filled, and almost at the same time, with laughter and tears (cf. Hag. 2:3); the same mouths were filled, and almost at the same time, with shouts of joy and of despair. Jehovah had done great things for them—so great that the very heathen are dramatically represented as looking on in astonishment. They were like men that dreamed; it had all been so much better and grander than they had dared to hope. Nobody had believed in the possibility of redemption—nobody but deutero-Isaiah, and the faithful band he may have gathered about him. "Who hath believed our report?" And yet it had come to pass. There they were, against all expectation, walking up and down the streets of the dear city they had never thought to see again. There they were, like men that dream.

And yet, the more familiar they grew with their redemption, the more unlovely and disappointing did it seem. Was it redemption after all? Their temple was making little progress. There were dark-hearted enemies on every hand. There were drought and barrenness instead of the fertility which they had hoped to see. They were as men in a dry and barren land wherein no water is; they looked up to the sky, but it was brazen (cf. Hag. 1:10, 11). If they sowed at all beneath so cruel a sky, it must be a sowing with tears. What would the heathen say now? Then would *their* mouth be filled with laughter, and *their* tongue with singing. They would say: "Aha! Aha! Where is now your God?"

Here is surely the realism of life. The same mouth may utter blessing and cursing. Standing on the same spot, feelings of the most diverse kinds may move and stir the heart. We look at the

past and are thankful; we look closer at the present and the future, and the sight makes our hearts bitter; and we ask: "Has not our misery only changed its form?" Verily life is an uneven thing.

Now, it is worthy of note that the faith which breathes through the sorrowful part of this psalm is as strong as that which inspires its earlier part. We might, indeed, say stronger. For it is easy to send up a shout of grateful praise when you have just come home from Babylon; but it is very different when the sky is brass above you, and you are sowing the seed with tears upon the dry and stubborn earth beneath you. And it is just here that the Psalmist's faith is so splendidly strong. He sees through his tears the God of the harvest, and comforts his heart with a vision of the waving fields in the days to come. The God who could deliver from the sorrows of exile in Babylon can no less deliver from the monotony, the depression, the persecution, that face those who love him in the home land. How long it will be till the dawn of the new day breaks the Psalmist does not know; but break it will, he is sure of that. The seed of faith is never sown in vain. If not he himself, then some other reaper will *assuredly* come—the Hebrew words are very emphatic—bearing his sheaves with him.

The lesson that runs through the psalm is the power of God to change the fortunes of men. Nothing is as it seems. A touch of God's hand, and the scene is transformed. He looks in pity upon his people in Babylon; they have still a great part to play in the accomplishment of the divine purpose. He says, "I will send a deliverer, and I will bring you across the desert to the dear homeland;" and lo! it is done. The dream becomes fact; the impossible has come to pass. Cyrus is Jehovah's Messiah (Isa. 45:1); he overthrows the empire under whose power Israel has been languishing, and lets Israel go free. The Psalmist is sure that the arm of such a God is not shortened; as he transformed the miseries of the past, so he can transform the sorrow and sufferings of the present. That is to us the valuable element in this Psalm, the unconquerable faith that God is the Lord of human history and of the destinies of men, that his beneficent will must be wrought out, and that somehow and somewhere the seed flung from a brave, honest, and hopeful hand will reappear as an abundant harvest. The changing fortunes of

men, like the changing seasons, are bound together by the love of God, and through the one as through the other, his gracious will is accomplished. Winter changes to spring, and seedtime to harvest; let that be our consolation in hours of disappointment. God can lay his kindly hand upon the circumstances of our life and so strangely mold them that we are bewildered by the happy transformation, and move about like men in a dream.

But we have to remember that with God a thousand years are but as yesterday. We sometimes speak and act as if we stood at the end of time, and had a right to demand that the consummation should be made plain before our eyes. But it is not so; we have only the years, but God has the centuries, and long and many may be the days between the sowing and the sheaves. He is the Master reaper, and he will bring the sheaves home that were sown by mortal hands in his own good time. The words of the Psalmist suggest that the sower and the reaper are the same. Alas! in this world it is not always so. Many a brave heart has gone down to the grave with noble yearnings ungratified and pure hopes unfulfilled. And yet in a sense deeper than he knew, the Psalmist was right. God cares not only for the race or for the nation, but also for the single soul; and he who sowed in tears shall assuredly reap with joy, if not in this world, then in some other. For God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, and all live unto him.

This song is placed among the so-called "Psalms of Ascent," that is, the Pilgrim psalms; and it is easy to imagine what a helpful song it must have been to the later pilgrims who went up to the feasts. They knew all the varied experiences reflected with such simple fidelity in the words of the psalm. To reach the Holy City, they had often to travel many a weary way. They had sowed, as it were, in tears, but they knew that they were not traveling on a vain errand; the goal of their journey was a vision of the God of Zion in his temple. So those later pilgrims would share, too, the faith that inspired the writer of this psalm. They had to sow in tears, but they were sure that they would reap again with joy; and when the festival was over, and the worship was but a glorious memory, how happy they must have been as they returned to their brethren, bearing with them a harvest of gladness which would sustain their souls for days to come!